



**National Endowment
for the Arts**

The Old Post Office

**A Staff Report for
Nancy Hanks, Chairman
National Endowment for the Arts**

September, 1973



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Early History

In the year 1890, the city block now bounded by 11th, 12th, C, and D Streets (Square 323), was the home of open-air markets featuring livestock and farm produce. The following year plans were drawn up to transform the site into what was thought of as the first step toward realizing the ceremonial boulevard of "grand axis" envisioned by l'Enfant a century before.

These plans, originating in the Office of the Supervising Architect of the Treasury, laid the groundwork for a new Federal office building to house both the U. S. Post Office Department and the Washington city post office.

Following ground-breaking in 1892, the pace of construction was so sluggish that it prompted a lengthy series of satirical essays in the *Washington Evening Star*. The building was finally completed in 1899 at a total cost of \$2,585.835.



Occupancy

Although the Old Post Office was the home of all Postmasters General from 1899 to 1934, it has served a wide variety of other functions. The building was shed of the city post office in 1914 when it moved to the newly-constructed Ben Franklin station adjacent to Union Station. In 1934, the Department of the Post Office was relocated in new headquarters built across 12th Street on Pennsylvania Avenue. Subsequently, the Post Office building has been occupied by the District of Columbia government and by numerous Federal agencies -- the Departments of Defense, Justice, Agriculture, and Interior, the Interstate Commerce Commission, the General Accounting Office, the Smithsonian Institution, and the U. S. Information Agency. Currently, the Federal Bureau of Investigation is a major tenant in the fortress-like structure.

The history of the building is rather uneventful, with the exception of the establishment in 1908 of an annual Flag Day celebration. The observance of the event took place for many years in the building's interior court, where a complete collection of State flags was displayed. On all other days, an enormous U. S. flag measuring 70 feet 4 inches by 34 feet was suspended from the courtyard's skylight roof.



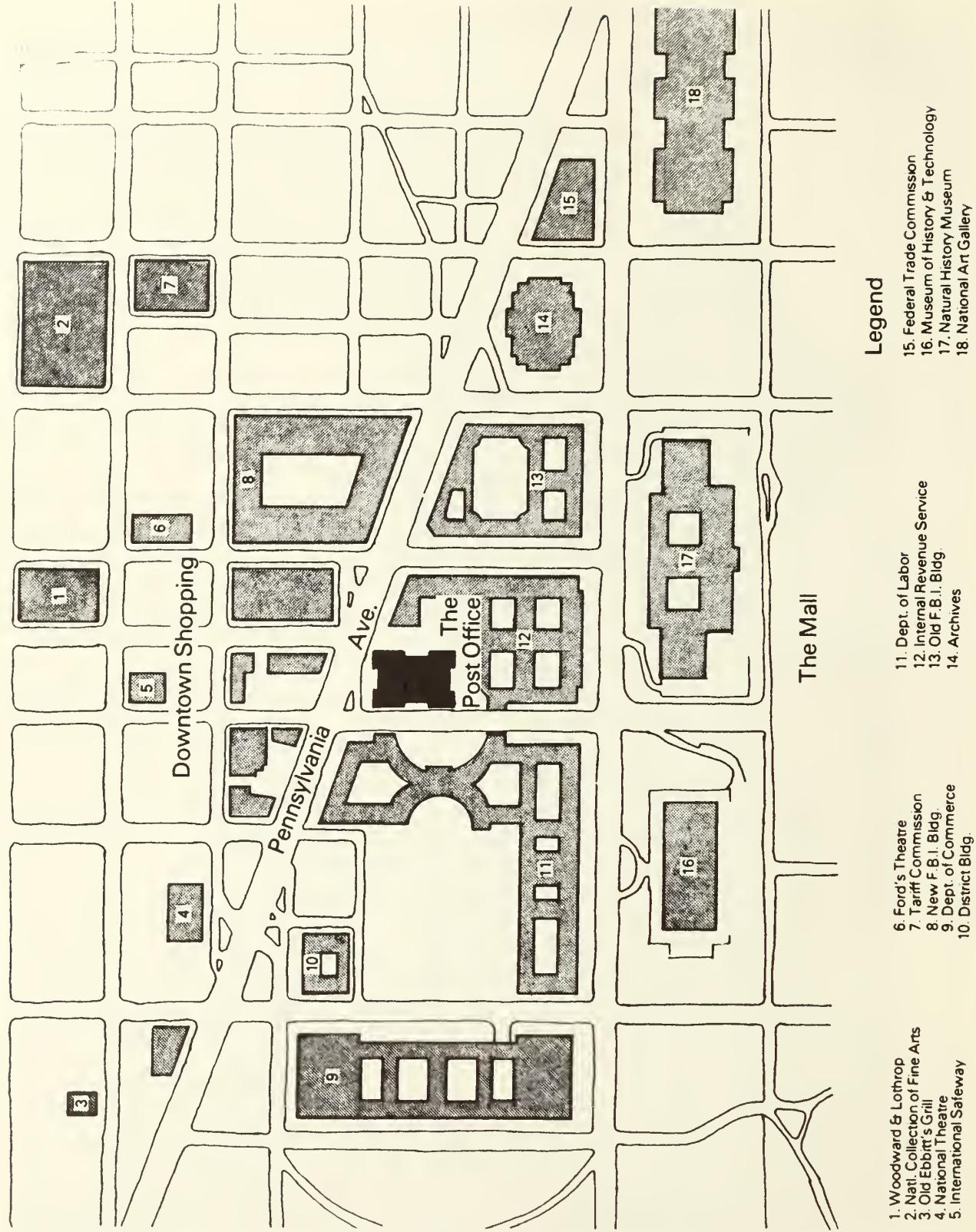
Architecture

In designing the Old Post Office, the building's architect, W. J. Edbrooke, chose an architectural style that he had used repeatedly during his term as Supervising Architect of the Treasury Building — Romanesque Revival. The style was reflected in post offices and courthouses built throughout the country during the 1890's. Popularized by the noted architect, H. H. Richardson, the style was considered the first creative contribution by American architecture. Several outstanding examples are still standing in St. Paul, Omaha, and Milwaukee; the Old Post Office represents one of Washington's few remaining Romanesque Revival structures on a monumental scale.

Due to a cruel irony of fluctuating architectural tastes, the Old Post Office was outdated even before construction was completed. The 1893 World's Columbian Exposition held in Chicago signaled the rise of neo-classical architecture and the demise of the Romanesque.

The Old Post Office now seems somber and soot-darkened to many accustomed to the glass and steel of present-day structures. On the other hand, the aging edifice is distinguished by several architectural features that offer tremendous appeal even to observers in 1973: the impressive clock tower rising to a height of 315 feet, the high chateau roof above the sky-lighted central courtyard, an exterior revealing elaborate patterns which blend arches and columns, carved spandrels and capitals, turrets and window bays.

Constructed of gray granite quarried at Vinalhaven, Maine, the building possesses walls of solid masonry five feet thick. It rises nine floors around a vast interior space measuring 99 feet by 184 feet by 157 feet. Spacious galleries surround the space on each floor and overlook the central courtyard through a series of interior arches. Sadly, the impact of the courtyard was diminished long ago by the installation of aluminum sheeting over the glass skylight as well as a false ceiling constructed above the ground floor to provide additional enclosed office space.



Legend

- 1. Woodward & Lothrop
- 2. Natl Collection of Fine Arts
- 3. Old Ebbitt's Grill
- 4. National Theatre
- 5. International Safeway
- 6. Ford's Theatre
- 7. Tariff Commission
- 8. New F.B.I. Bldg.
- 9. Dept. of Commerce
- 10. District Bldg.
- 11. Dept. of Labor
- 12. Internal Revenue Service
- 13. Old F.B.I. Bldg.
- 14. Archives
- 15. Federal Trade Commission
- 16. Museum of History & Technology
- 17. Natural History Museum
- 18. National Art Gallery

Design Plans For Pennsylvania Avenue

The Pennsylvania Avenue that served as a setting for the Old Post Office in the 1890's was lined with saw mills, rooming houses and produce markets. It bore little resemblance to l'Enfant's "grand axis." Even before the completion of the Old Post Office, however, the first of numerous design plans was formulated to make l'Enfant's dream a reality. From that time until the present, the Old Post Office has remained a pivotal and controversial element in schemes for the design of Pennsylvania Avenue.

This trend began in 1896 with the issuance of a report by William Aiken, Edbrooke's successor as Supervising Architect of the Treasury. The report proposed the concept of a large complex of Federal buildings on Pennsylvania Avenue -- a "Federal Triangle." In Aiken's report the Post Office was to be the first component of his plan.

Plans for Federal Triangle were soon modified when, in 1901, a report prepared under the auspices of the Senate Committee on the District of Columbia proposed the use of the site to house the administrative and service functions of the District government. The report, known as the McMillan Commission Plan, reflected the influence of architect Daniel Burnham and other Commission members promoting neo-classical architecture for all future government buildings. Despite this neo-classical bias, the Post Office was the only building in the Triangle area which the Commission recommended retaining.

In 1928, a board of architectural consultants under the direction of Andrew Mellon, Secretary of the Treasury, planned a complex of monumental Federal buildings grouped around two large plazas. The entire Triangle development was planned as one unit of design in the neo-classical style with a fixed cornice height. Several buildings — the District Building, the Coast Guard Building and the Old Post Office — which did not conform to this plan were scheduled for demolition.

From 1930 to 1938, nine government buildings were constructed in the Federal Triangle. Due to lack of funds, however, the Mellon Plan was never entirely realized and the Post Office remained standing.

After a lengthy period of inactivity, President Kennedy appointed a Pennsylvania Avenue Commission in 1962 to outline plans for the future development of the Avenue. The Commission made the following recommendations: (1) demolition of the Coast Guard Building to make possible the extension of the Triangle to the District Building; (2) creation of a Grand Plaza by moving parking underground and, (3) demolition of the Old Post Office Building to enable the completion of the Great Circle on 12th Street. The Commission did recommend, nevertheless, that the Post Office clock tower be preserved "as a memento of the time it represents, as a vertical punctuation on the Avenue, and as a city lookout." In recent years, several members of the Commission, including the Chairman, Nathaniel Owings, and the Vice-Chairman, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, have modified their positions and endorsed retention of the entire building. This position has also been advocated by General E. R. Quesada, Chairman of the Pennsylvania Avenue



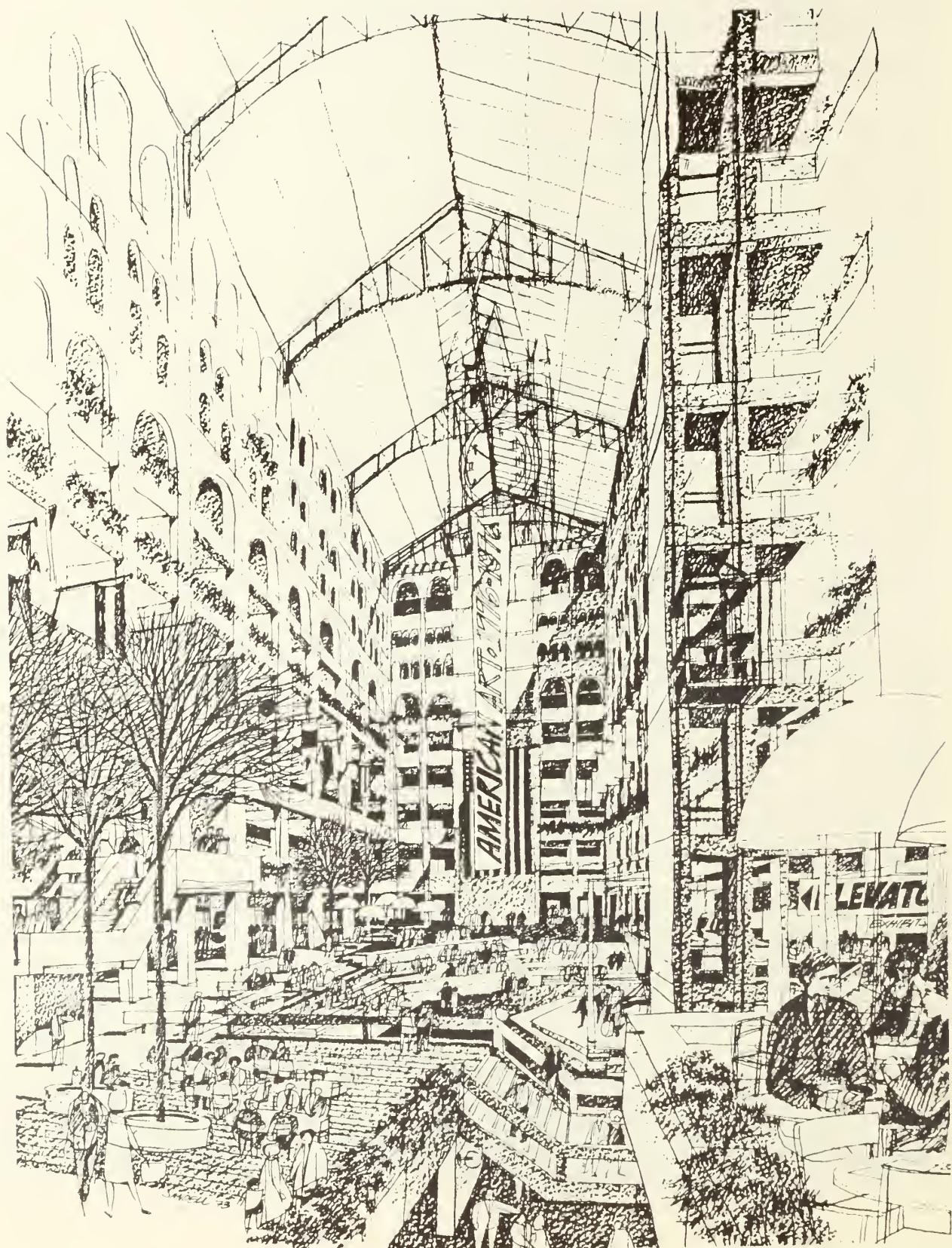
Development Corporation, a 22 member body established by Congress in 1972. The corporation has broad authority for planning and implementation, including the power of eminent domain and considerable borrowing power.

Until recently, plans involving the future of the Federal Triangle followed the recommendations made by the Pennsylvania Avenue Commission in 1964. A General Services Administration prospectus was approved by Congress in 1966 proposing the completion of the entire Federal Triangle project, including the demolition of the Old Post Office and the construction of the Internal Revenue Service Building Extension. In 1972, this prospectus was modified and divided into three separate prospectuses which are still pending.

In light of a series of events reflecting local and national historic preservation sentiment, the General Services Administration has in recent years adopted a policy of receptivity to plans to preserve the Old Post Office. In 1966, Congress enacted the National Historic Preservation Act which directed the Federal government to accelerate its historic preservation programs and activities. Executive Order 11593, issued by President Nixon in May of 1971, directed the agencies of the Executive branch to adopt a role of stewardship in preserving historic sites, structures, and objects for future generations. A resolution passed in the same month by the President's Advisory Council on Historic Preservation called for the retention of the Old Post Office and for the consideration of alternatives to demolition by GSA. Finally, in early 1973, the building was approved for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places.

Concurrent with these official expressions of sympathy for the preservation of the Old Post Office, considerable support arose among architects, historians, government officials, and local citizens for a variety of proposals for the adaptive use of the building.

On June 7, 1973, GSA Administrator Arthur F. Sampson submitted a prospectus to the Office of Management and Budget proposing the transfer of a leasehold interest in the building to the District of Columbia under the provisions of the 1972 amendments to the Surplus Property Act (Public Law 92-362). According to these amendments, renovation and maintenance of the building may be achieved through funds generated by revenue-producing activities in the building.



Rehabilitation: Objectives

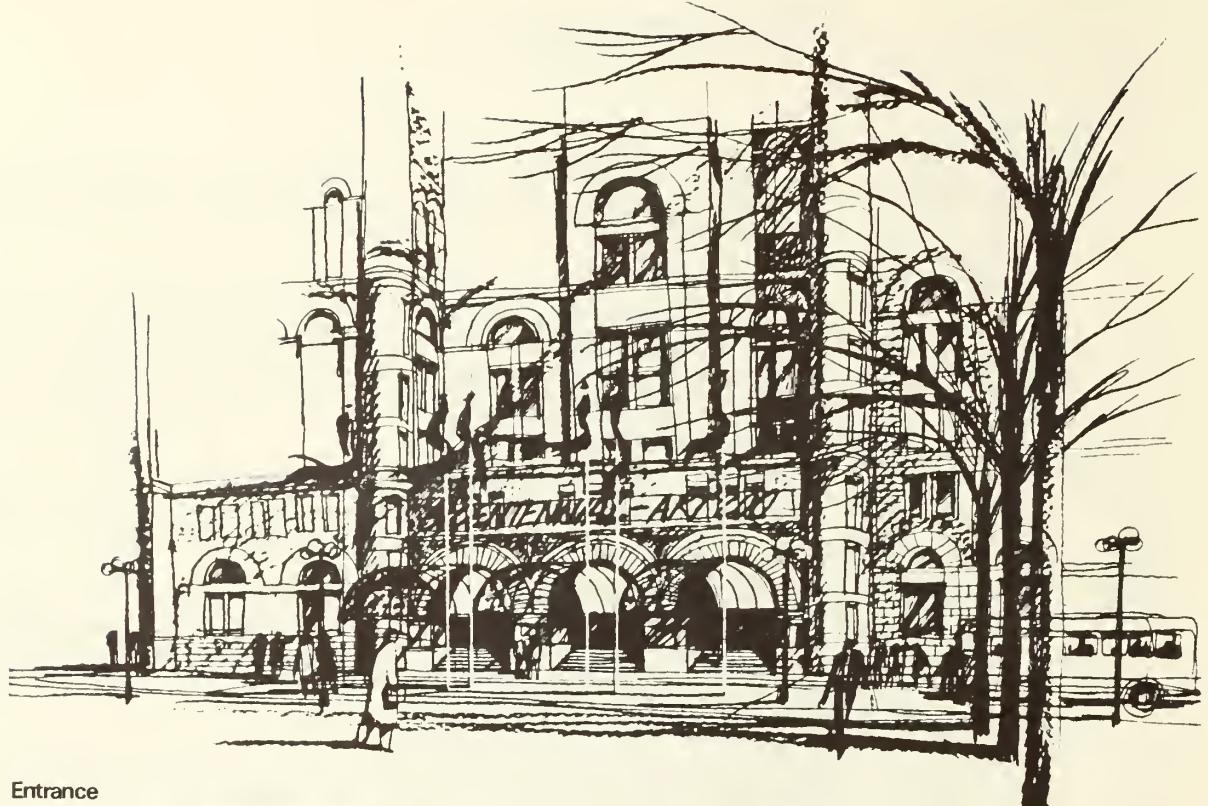
Because of the size, location, and historic interest of the Old Post Office, the building would be ideal for demonstrations of Federal leadership in several major areas.

The rehabilitation of the Old Post Office could be designed as a model of mixed uses, providing a lively blend of cultural and commercial activities as well as office space for local and Federal government agencies and private organizations. A mixed use building of this sort would contribute enormously to the revitalization of downtown Washington for daytime and evening activities.

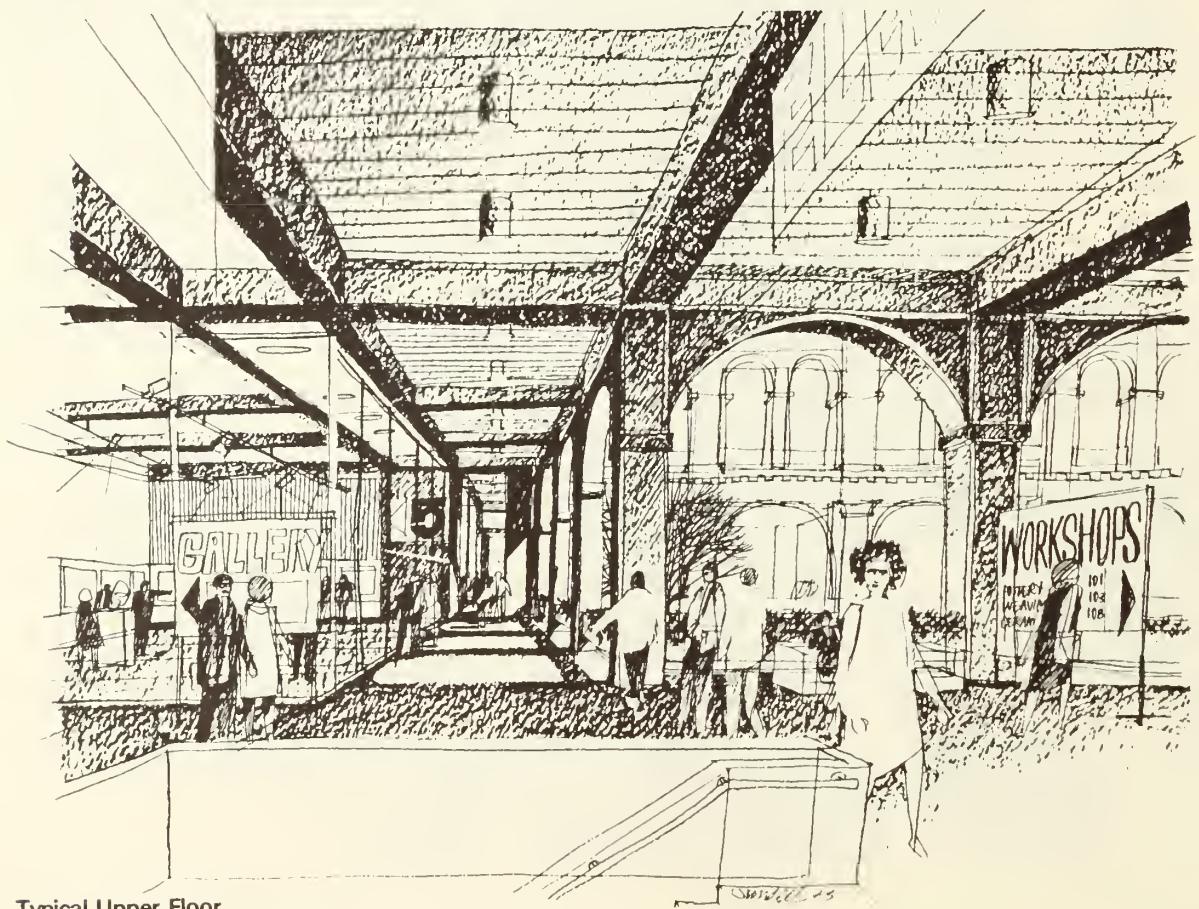
In connection with the Endowment's Presidentially mandated emphasis on excellence in Federal design, the building could serve as a showcase for outstanding graphics, furnishings, and interior design.

In keeping with the recent Executive Order calling for Federal stewardship in the area of historic preservation, the building could exemplify the adaptive-use possibilities of older building – along the lines of Old City Hall in Boston, Ghirardelli Square in San Francisco, and the Southern Railway Terminal in Chattanooga.

The historic nature of the Old Post Office as well as its location makes the building a highly appropriate setting for a variety of projects relating to the Bicentennial celebration in the District of Columbia. The building could augment activities planned for the proposed visitors' center at Union Station.



Entrance



Typical Upper Floor

Rehabilitation: Potential Uses

The National Endowment for the Arts has undergone rapid growth over the past several years. Similar expansion in budget and personnel will undoubtedly continue. Since its inception, however, the agency has never had a permanent home. Only recently, the agency completed its third move in four years.

Federal Offices

The National Endowment for the Arts' projected space needs for the foreseeable future almost precisely match the upper floor office space available in the Old Post Office. A role as prime tenant in the rehabilitated Old Post Office would be well suited to the Nation's primary arts agency. This appropriateness is heightened by the building's potential for a wide range of cultural activities corresponding to each of the Endowment's program areas. It would furnish a high level of visibility for the ever increasing concern by the Federal Government for the arts in America.

Upper floor square footage could also accommodate office space for those Federal Agencies with responsibility for historic preservation, including the Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation within the National Park Service and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation.

The building's lower floors, particularly the ground floor, offer numerous possibilities for lively uses, jointly sponsored by the Endowment, the National Park Service, and the Department of Interior.

Office/Meeting Space

Lower floors of the building would be ideal for office or meeting space for local cultural organizations -- public and private. Numerous local groups, ranging from the D. C. Bicentennial Commission to dance and drama companies representing the Black community, have expressed interest in occupying space in a renovated Post Office.

Performance Spaces

Small, intimate performing spaces would be ideal for chamber music, poetry readings, or experimental theatre.

Cultural Clearinghouse

A clearinghouse at the Old Post Office could publicize opportunities for participation in area-wide cultural events.

A Ticketron bureau could handle ticket sales for all manner of local cultural events as well as performances at Kennedy Center and other major theatres.

Restaurant

A restaurant could offer good, moderately priced food, either under existing concession regulations or under new ones developed in cooperation with the local business community. The restaurant could conceivably operate on a non-profit basis, with profits directed into programming for the building's performance space.

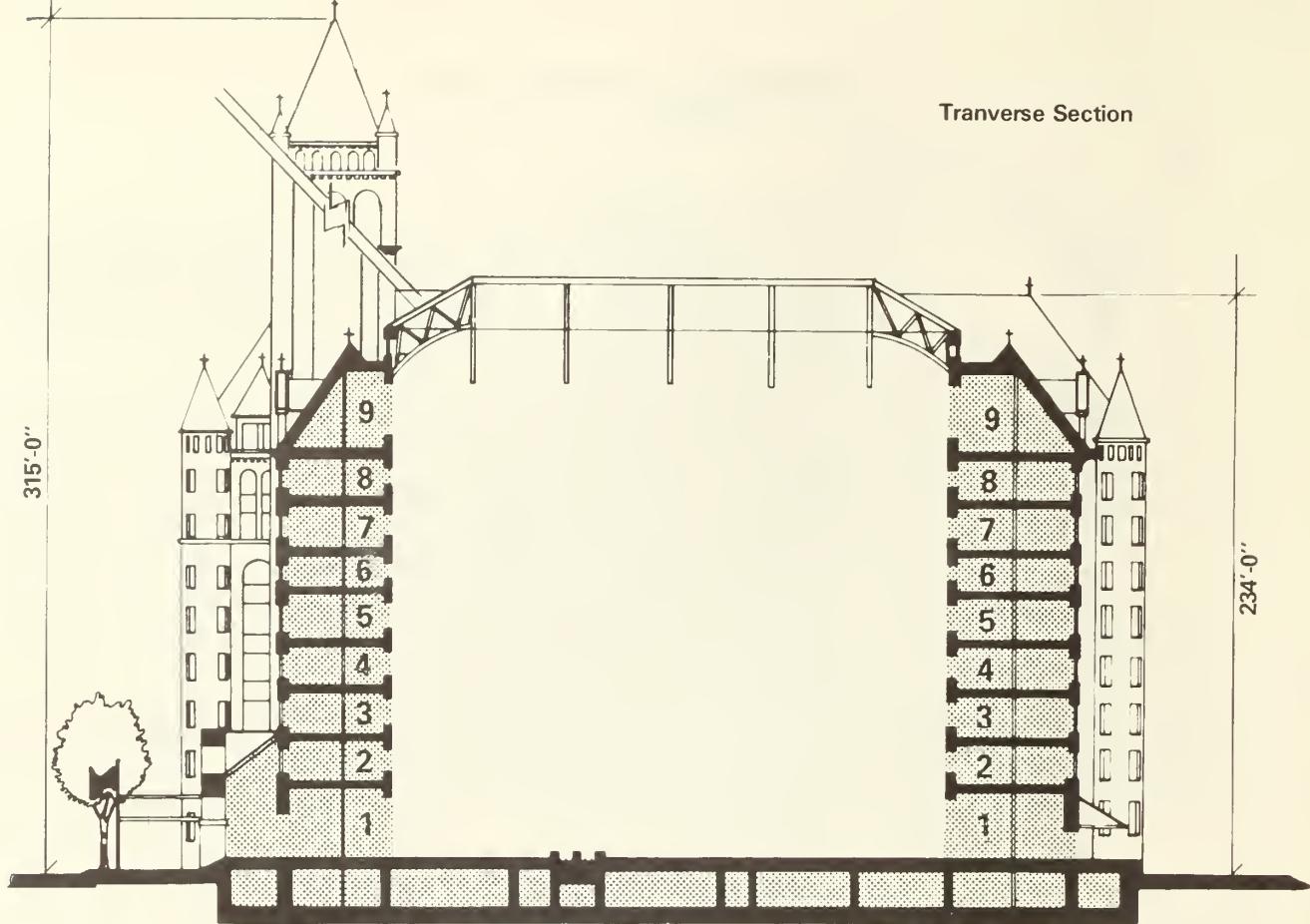
Design Shops

Inviting shops could offer the best in contemporary American design -- furnishings, fabrics, graphic art, etc.

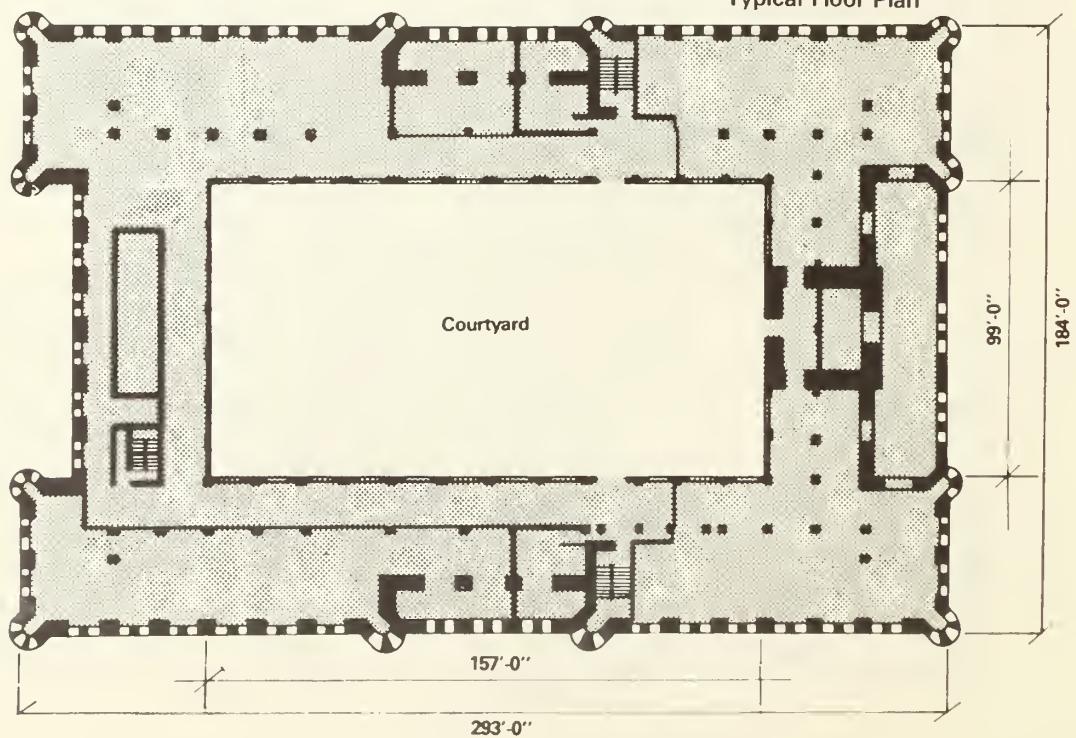
Special Post Office

A branch of the U. S. Postal Service, featuring colorful posters, could offer stamps of unusual design as well as regular postal services.

Transverse Section



Typical Floor Plan



Craftsmen-In-Residence	Outstanding craftsmen representing the fifty states -- perhaps selected by State arts councils -- could occupy workshop space on a rotating basis. Potters, weavers, and other folk artists could offer their wares for sale and could teach master classes to interested observers.
Winter in the Parks	The American Indian Crafts Shop now located at the Department of Interior might occupy space here as well.
Major Exhibits	The courtyard would be an appropriate winter home for the Summer in the Parks program administered by National Capital Parks. Local musicians, dance companies, and drama groups would benefit tremendously from the high degree of public exposure that could be afforded by courtyard performances.
Flag Displays	The vast size of the courtyard would permit exhibits featuring sizeable canvases or monumental sculpture. Other major exhibits appealing to a wide audience could explore such topics as the adaptive use of older buildings, using the Old Post Office as a model to explain objectives and procedures.
Clock Tower & Carillon	<p>Fifty years ago the Old Post Office courtyard was a permanent exhibit hall for flags from all the states. It seems appropriate to revive this tradition and at the same time add colorful accents and a Bicentennial flair to the restored building.</p> <p>A renovated clock tower would be a charming landmark particularly at night when the four lighted clock faces could be read easily at a distance. A carillon could be installed in the tower for concerts on national holidays or during evening rush hour. The splendid view from the tower would make its interior appropriate for a variety of special events.</p> <p>Finally, the Old Post Office courtyard possesses tremendous appeal as an impressive interior space. The removal of the false ceiling and the sheeting now covering the skylight would restore sunlight and permit landscaping and even mature trees. Office workers and visitors alike could observe activity in the courtyard from glass elevators moving from floor to floor. A festive backdrop for fairs and celebrations, the courtyard could also serve as a pleasant, park-like setting in which to sit and rest the year-round.</p>



Estimated Cost Of Rehabilitation

The Old Post Office currently provides about 215,000 net square feet of office space. Renovation and adaptation of the spacious corridors would add approximately 87,000 square feet to the amount of useable office/exhibit space. The vast courtyard would offer over 18,000 square feet for performance and exhibit space.

The General Services Administration has estimated a cost of \$12 million for renovation of the Old Post Office. Taking into account approximately 369,500 of gross square footage, this estimate would result in a renovation cost of approximately \$32.50 per square foot.

